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Catfight Aesthetics in Kill Bill [original conference paper title]
Women in Action: An Evolving Paradigm in Film and Film Analysis [new working title]
Version 3.1

This is a draft version of a working paper. Not for citation or quotation without permission. Originally, as a conference paper it considered female duels to the death in *Kill Bill*. Since then I've expanded my interest to deal with more of the history and context of female warriors and feminist film criticism's evolving consideration of the figure and theme of action women.
Due to the illness and death of a family member this spring, this is a work-in-progress. I hope this fluid state will be a starting point for critique and further discussion that I can incorporate into a later version. To facilitate that, I'll use footnotes and bracketed statements along the way regarding issues I think need fuller elaboration than is possible here. I've not been able to see the new Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino diptych film *Grindhouse*. The Tarantino film is especially pertinent.

[thesis]
I believe we've experienced a paradigm shift in the figure of the cinematic warrior woman in recent years, due to a convergence of new cinema technologies and production practices, certain cultural resonances of the international feminist political movement, and changes in global film making and marketing. Thus I'm taking an educated guess about an inherently contradictory process, and I could be wrong. Or things could still change--even reverse. But I want to make a case, and to tease out the most obvious objections in the process. My hope then, is that others will look at the same phenomenon and add their analysis. What I have to say extensively draws on and synthesizes from three different excellent articles, by Lisa Jervis, L. S. Kim, and Aaron Anderson, and then takes the discussion a bit farther by reading with/through Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky's study of Lara Croft as virtual agent in a cyberworld. Writing in LIP, Jervis' "Hot Girl-On-Girl Action: The Peculiar Problem of Politics, Pornography & the Ass-kicking Babe," argues that we've seen an increase in the numbers of empowered action women, and a movement of the figure of the fighting female from the margins of exploitation film to the mainstream of entertainment. At the same time Jervis recognizes the tension between women warrior characters appearing as objects of a sexist male gaze and their capacity to demonstrate female agency and embody power. L. S. Kim's essay on *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* extends the discussion by considering how Chinese martial arts females operate within and between an Asian reception and Western Orientalist perception. Extending that concern, Rong Cai's article on *CTHD* explains the *wuxia* tradition in terms of allowing unorthodox presentations of women while reaffirming normative gender systems. Anderson's contribution to the issue lies in explaining the embodiment of character and the expression of power in martial arts performance, particularly in *Kill Bill* 1 and 2. Deuber-Mankowsky argues that Lara Croft is "able to span the gap between men's sexual fantasies and women's longings for supernatural agility," while returning us to the question of gendered spectatorship/engagement.

[I am also interested in film theory developments, in particular feminist analysis, which has changed over the past 35 years in part in relation to the changing nature of film productions as well as the analysis itself evolving a richer discourse.]

Female Action
In the development of feminist film criticism in the 1970s, little attention was given to women characters who were primarily defined by their skilled physical actions, with the significant exception of pornographic representations. Women who embodied power and agency tended to be viewed only from the analytical frame of the femme fatale figure, going back to Theda Bara's vamp in silent film or Marlene Deitrich's Blue Angel and forward to the scheming and seductive women of film noir such as Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*. Mirroring the dominant social ideology, it was the unusual woman character who was positively regarded for her active body (beyond the voice, movement, and gesture all actors use), and in most cases these females entered film from an achievement in sports or performance. Thus in the 30s and 40s, Sonia Henie was an international competitive ice skating star before entering movies; Eleanor Powell the best female tap dancer of her era, tall and so dynamic she was impossible to pair with a male peer; and Esther Williams a champion swimmer before her film career. [transition]

Even with the rise of the women's movement in the US in the 70s, the female athletes who achieved notable attention tended to be those who competed as individuals: gymnasts, ice skaters (also in heterosexual dance pairs), track, or relay teams as runners and swimmers. At the time, only tennis offered direct peer to peer competition; and it was not until the mid-1990s that female sports which involve contact were fully recognized (such as soccer and lacrosse), although various martial arts have found a female following especially in relation to "self-defense" training. Full fledged combat contact for women in film such as boxing remains rarity (e.g., *Million Dollar Baby*). More widespread, female police are visibly sanctioned to use force, in life and on the screen. It remains the case that while women in the armed forces are trained for combat, should the need arise, actual frontline active combat units in Iraq, for example, are all-male.

The figure of an accomplished physically aggressive female on screen has recently been taken up by several feminist critics with slightly different emphases. Some of this has been phrased within a simplistic but contentious and antagonistic frame as Second Wave Feminism vs. Post -Feminism, with the former interpreting action women as expressing (male) violence, or women acting like men, and being the sexy object of a male gaze, while the latter position interprets the same figures as women expressing agency (including sexuality) and martial skill. [elaborate]

Some critics in this field have started with the idea of women characters who are violent, either sanctioned (soldiers, cops, contact sports figures, and detectives) or unsanctioned (crazed and criminal; femme fatales and black widows) or driven to violence to protect themselves or others. Others have considered women characters with considerable martial or combat skills who break from the common social expectations to act as spies, secret agents, vampire slayers, superheroes, and so forth. In her book on female superhero figures, *Wonder Women*, Lillian S. Robinson points that there is a tradition of warrior women in Western literature, going back to (her PhD dissertation topic and subsequent book) the Sixteenth century epic with Bradamante in Ariosto's *Orlando Furiouso*, Clorinda in Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*, and Britomart in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. We might think too of Joan of Arc and the various versions of her story (and remember that Schiller has the heroic Maid die on the battlefield, as a warrior

remember that Schiller has the heroic Maid die on the battlefield, as a warrior, and not suffer clerical and political trials).

Recently much of the passionate critical attention to imagining women with agency has considered the vast expansion of popular culture images of action women. The central expression of female warriors in the action adventure film itself has a history. Film historian Ben Singer details silent film melodramatic action films which include the "Serial-Queen" dramas with plucky young women coming to the rescue in the nick of time with physical stunts. In the 1930s, a series of films in India featured Mary Evans, a Australian born woman who travelled to India with a circus as a performer and who ended up marrying the Indian owner of a film studio; she appeared in film playing "Fearless Nadia," a skilled acrobatic woman who provided a distinct contrast with the women of Hindi domestic melodrama.

U.S. comic books in the 1940s produced the self-consciously proto-feminist Wonder Woman as the first of a series of accomplished female heroes. Her creator, William Moulton Marston, explained his motives in *The American Scholar* in 1943:
   Not even girls want to be girls, so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, and power. Not wanting to be girls, they don't want to be tender, submissive, peace-loving as good women are. Women's strong qualities have become despised because of their weakness. The obvious remedy is to create a feminine character with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman.

Wonder Woman is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world.

Returning to film, in the late 60s and early 70s, exploitation cinema--particularly Blaxploitation films (such as *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* starring Pam Grier)--represented strong women ready to fight the bad guy). More recent films often cited by feminists writers include *Thelma and Louise* which created a feminist sensation. Other notable depictions includes the "musculinity" of female characters including Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in the *Alien* series, and Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in *Terminator 2*, and Demi Moore in *G. I. Jane*.
In terms of television we can go back to 70s shows such as *Wonder Woman, Charlie's Angels*, and *The Bionic Woman* as precursors to a vast expansion of women warrior characters in the last ten years with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Alias, La Femme Nikita*, and others. who demonstrate willingness to use weapons and deadly force.

As part of this distinctly uneven development, narrative analysis has often pointed to the more common narrative trope of female sidekick or partner which allows greater or lesser expression, but generally within a heteronormative structure (e.g. *The Avengers* TV series), or new versions of the dangerous female (as in the criminal couple such as *Bonnie and Clyde* or *Natural Born Killers*.
 [elabaorate]

In the 1990s a major reworking of feminist analysis of the action woman character appeared with Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* which considered the elaborate horror stalker film, such as *Halloween*. In this teen horror formula, a group of young people in an isolated place are murdered one by one by a mysterious assailant. At the end the villain is vanquished by the Final Girl, a female who stands up and fights, finally winning. Clover was interested not only in the repetition and variation of the narrative formula (she trained as a folklorist) but also in the observable fact that these films were very

popular with young male viewers who had to identify across gender lines with the Final Girl. Clover recognized the empowerment built into the figure, but was also deeply skeptical of just how "feminist" such a figure could be. [elaborate w/ref to Brown]

At the same time, feminism's success in the last quarter of the 20C permitted the expansion of cultural norms and expectations to allow for women characters who are athletic, aggressive, and even highly skilled combatants, especially when they are agents of justice and avenging wrongs done by powerful men and/or evil women, and especially when they are conventionally physically beautiful, and often when placed in a symbolic mother role.

[An Aside on Amazons]

At this point, I'd like to interrupt my overview of narrative considerations and feminist critical theoy to look back on one critical question that has been pushed aside but still seems relevant. This is the early feminist question raised by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen in their film *Penthesilea* (Are Amazon warrior women just another male fantasy?) seems lost today in the enthusiastic critical reception of work such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.   Mulvey and Wollen's film answered the question with a "yes"--Amazons are a male fantasy. The five part feature length film starts with recording a silent performance of the Kleist play *Penthesilea* by a Northwestern University student performance group. Next is a lecture by Wollen as he moves though a large well-appointed house presenting the basic facts and interpretation. Another educational section follows with a discussion of figures of Amazons in art history, including mass culture such as Wonder Woman, along with an analysis of how the myth developed and was used. The next section presents an early short silent film promoting women's suffrage, visually juxtaposed over an actress' face reading from writings by First Wave feminist Jesse Ashley arguing for creating a close link between the suffrage movement and the working class movement. The film's final section displays four channels of video from each of the preceding sections with the sound track shifting from one previous episode to another providing a metacommentary on the preceding (e.g., the lead female actor discusses her role while in the dressing room). Mulvey and Wollen's first film, it is a terribly earnest essayistic work with clear-cut indebtedness to Godard, Straub-Huillet, and other then-darlings of the European experimental film scene. In short, it is what for a time was called a "theory film"--a film in which the central agenda is examination of a major current aspect of film theory.

But what was that issue? What about Amazons? Since the film approaches the question indirectly, it would be hard for a current audience to grasp the issue without more specific historical knowledge. We could put it this way: why would these politically progressive filmmakers and theorists think it was important at that moment to ask if Amazons are really a progressive feminist image, or if they are just another case of male fantasies, which we could connect to Mulvey's then recently published essay on artist Allen Jones use of female fetish images (analyzed in terms of the Freudian notion of the "phallic woman") and her forthcoming landmark essay on the male gaze. We can gain some understanding of the matter as a critical issue by asking: who was saying that Amazons were a radically new feminist image, fitting a Second Wave sensibility? And the answer is that many lesbian feminists of the time had put forward (especially in the US where Mulvey and Wollen lived at the time) the notion of a Lesbian Nation (or Amazon Nation). This vision of Amazons within lesbian feminist writing and art was part continuation of 60s counterculture thinking (communes, Woodstock) and fantasy, and partly a reflection of genuine

grassroots lesbian cultural projects (the Michigan Women's Music Festival; publications, and conferences and separate organizations; lesbian spaces such as coffeehouses and bookstores). The fantasy of Amazon Nation especially had force in reference to the heteronormativity of the liberal mainstream of the Women's Movement, and its unfortunately frequent homophobia. The subsequent development of lesbian politics and culture, in particular with queer thought.

[elaborate here: Mulvey's dependence on Freudian Phallic Woman analysis; limits of the VPNC analysis and subsequent feminist revisions of it. Its inability to deal effectively with the action female figure.]

Mulvey

Our first film, *Penthesilea*, made in 1974, has certain links with my article "Fears, Fantasies and the Male Unconscious (Allen Jones)". Both the Amazon myth and Allen Jones's collection of pin-ups tell a story of male castration anxiety, how it can be projected onto the female image and produces a fascination with phallic femininity. (p. ix)

Wollen: Precisely, It turns out that the Amazon myth is a male phantasy. The Amazon society is situated in myth, and the myth is a male phantasy founded on castration. The Question is: could it take place in history? Could the abolition of patriarchal law take place in history?

...

Mulvey: Women have tried to recapture the myth of the Amazon's. But, in fact, what the myth celebrated was the defeat of women, the castration of women. But recently women have tried to recapture the myth for themselves, through identification with the Amazon's. What the movie tries to do is to show that the myth is still within the patriarchal symbolic order. So the problem is not, can you recapture the myth through female identification, but can you conceive of a symbolic order which is non-patriarchal? (p. 130)

The difference between pin-up (iconic)
Comic book--still images that only imply motion
Anime--works between the modes, from still to motion
Film--full motion, action, figure in movement, dance etc. choreography

On Contradictions

To bring this larger discussion back to one specific film, *Kill Bill*, I have several questions I want to explore about representations of female warriors or fighting women. Are martial women inevitably framed within a patriarchal gaze? Or are they heroic examples of women taking control and expressing agency? Further, how does the image of women fighting women change when the women fighting are skilled combatants?

Kill Bill offer opportunities to reconsider the question in terms of contemporary feminist theory as it reexamines tradition, irony, postmodern appropriation, martial skills, and sophisticated rationalizations and ethical excuses. In the film Tarantino reframes the catfight situation within a series of refractive appropriations: the rape revenge character, the female avenger/protector, the jilted lover/employee, as well as the female rival. Thus I will argue, the film raises issues that center on how we understand deep contradiction and historical change in the figure of the female warrior. Tarantino, voracious consumer of popular culture internationally, also conducts his appropriations across national

popular culture internationally, also conducts his appropriations across national boundaries, and in *Kill Bill* includes to the wholesale (selective) importation of Asian action tropes. Because of this kind of cultural appropriation (and implicit homage and commentary within the film, the audience's own cultural capital is an important part of the understanding, interpretation, and appreciation of the film's representation of action women.

[The Catfight as a narrative device]
Second Wave feminists declared cat fights to be obvious misogynist spectacle. And so these moments in film were, in most cases. They were thinly veiled excuses for women to have clothing torn, skin exposed, display unusual physical positions, and suffer mild injury (such as slapping and hair-pulling) and indignity for the amusement of men. In film catfights were treated as comic moments and narrativized usually to emphasize female jealousy. In short, they were the cinematic equivalent of mud wrestling or wet t-shirt contests, and they have not fundamentally changed though they are now elaborated in female "professional" exhibition wrestling in the USA, appear as an integral part of *The Jerry Springer Show*, and are found in girlfights in YouTube clips, often documents of schoolyard tussles.

Kill Bill vol. 1 has two central female/female fights. The first is between The Bride (Uma Thurman) and Vernita Green (Vivica A. Fox). It takes place in domestic space, Green's home, and involves considerable knife fighting, hand-to-hand and close action combat. Dramatically this sequence introduces The Bride in terms of her combat skills and underlines her revenge motive. It also introduces a thematic issue central to the two *Kill Bill* films that of motherhood which was denied to The Bride whose pregnancy ended when she was shot at her wedding four years earlier; and was achieved by Green who is now married and living in suburban Pasadena. The second sequence female/female fight is the virtuoso long sequence in the House of Blue Leaves in which The Bride dressed in a yellow track suit, has to dispatch numerous body guards, including the key henchmen characters Sophie Fatale (Julie Dreyfus) and Go Go Yubari (Chiaki Kuriyama) before the final sword fight in the snow filled Zen garden with O-Ren Ishii (Lucy Liu). This sequence is dominated by swordplay, and the final fight is a classic recreation of and homage to the swordplay genre.
[In both cases the fights are visually coded within conventional racial categories-- at least in the US. "Blondie kills People of Color" as Nina K. Martin reports her feminist popular culture class at Emory U. described it. To be elaborated-- visually this is true enough, but narratively and dramatically I would argue that the race issue is drastically reduced due to back-story and fan connoisseurship in the genre--addressed below--while also complicated and perhaps potentiated by international crosscultural appropriations.]

My argument here is not an "either/or" or a "neither/nor" one but a "both/and" about the interlocking concerns. In the large narrative terms, here are some of the ways the script develops the character of The Bride:
1. She was an assassin for hire, a female killer, a criminal, and therefore bad. *But* this was before the present action of the film begins. The assassin character is a familiar Asian action film trope which carries familiar narrative commonplaces to those who know the genre.
2. In the film's present, she is victimized. Having tried to retire from the hitwoman profession, have her child, and marry, she was shot repeatedly at the ceremony, including a bullet in the head by her former boss, lover, and the father of her child, Bill (David Carradine), and left for dead. She survives in a coma and is subsequently repeatedly raped. She arises from near-death, and begins a journey of revenge on her enemies and reclaiming her daughter. Her motives are

journey of revenge never includes that concerning her daughter, that motive is the personal retribution and motherhood. So, she is also sympathetic, and the protagonist through whom we understand the narrative [narrative point of view]. And the framing narration uses The Bride's voice in off screen voice-over or in a few instances, direct address, thus further suturing the spectator into the story from The Bride's point of view.

3. She is powerful, skilled, and empowered, and thus admirable within the framework of the narrative. Her two opponents, in contrast, are duplicitously deceptive and violate the warrior codes of behavior. Green does this when the two women halt their combat when her daughter comes home from school, and then proposes a one-on-one knife fight late at night; however she then uses a hidden gun to shoot at The Bride who responds with a fatal thrown knife to the chest. O-Ren sends in all of her crew before herself facing The Bride, although the grudge is only between the two of them.

4. An essential part of the martial arts film's governing framework is that by convention, combat here is always to the death. Therefore, in any situation The Bride has to act and seek a mortal victory, and all of her opponents clearly understand the stakes. This removes any relative or incremental moral and ethical issues from the table in terms of justice. But we also see that The Bride in fact is more compassionate than her opponents. She agrees to stop the knife fight when the daughter comes home so the child does not see injury and death; she agrees to displacing the final combat to a later time, and when she has killed her opponent and the daughter witnesses her mother's death, tells the little girl that while she knows this was a just revenge, if in the future the child wants to continue the chain of death, she will understand.

5. A further formal intervention affects our understanding of the two major fight sequences. The combatants are very highly trained and the fights are very clearly choreographed. Because we recognize this, we understand that the events are a test of mind, will, body, and skill. Thus the typically overt voyeurism of the catfight as display for a (presumed) masculine viewer is drastically reduced. Indeed, while the fight at Green's house does show body form, this is largely within the expectations of displaying physical prowess. And the fight at the House of Blue Leaves has Thurman in a loose fitting (and quickly blood splattered) track suit, Fatale in a flowing business outfit, Yubari in a highly ironic Japanese schoolgirl costume, and Liu in a traditional Japanese kimono garb that obscures and restricts her body form.

Postmodern transnational appropriation and connoisseurship

As Anderson notes, writing from the perspective of a combat choreographer, film fights are themselves carefully orchestrated for dramatic narrative effect. That narrational quality changes them. The thoughtless criticism that combats are pure spectacle, (and thus aesthetically inferior in an Aristotelian framework) is mistaken. Anderson also points out that the fights are planned, read, and understood within conventions. In the case of Tarantino film, the fight choreography is further complicated by the auteur's celebrated postmodern appropriations. In this case, with this film, Tarantino the consummate cult film fan, draws on an incredibly wide range of popular global cinema. Thus the rape-revenge film (e.g., *I Spit on Your Grave*) with a characteristic detailed depiction of the victim's degradation and abjection before setting the sequence of revenge (outside the law). Thus the Japanese swordplay martial arts film, with its strict code of warrior behavior. Thus the Asian (Japanese and now Korean in particular) revenge film with its relentless passage to a final showdown. And the Chinese *wuxia pian* genre ranging through various traditional edge weapons (the Beijing and Cantonese opera tradition) and hand to hand combat (the Hong Kong kung fu tradition) to its more recent updating with guns. East Asian

cinema also has a familiar narrative tradition of the assassin (related by theme to the US figure of the Mafia hitman) such as John Woo's Hong Kong film *The Killer*, or the US films (also starring Chow Yun Fat), *The Replacement Killers*.

If one knows these types of films and their conventions and expectations, one reads a work like *Kill Bill* with connoisseurship, Anderson argues. In much of Asia, ordinary popular entertainment cinema viewers do; and in the West, cult cinema fans along with many audience members with a cultural or heritage connection to Asian popular cinema do as well. This means some people understand the films within a knowledge of themes and variations. Others of course do not. They do not have the transnational cultural capital to appreciate *Kill Bill* in this way.

Add too—CTHD in arthouse circuit—we3sterners unfamiliar with tradition

[Discuss here: the contentious issue of fanboy culture, Tarantino as an example, Lu and others on the issue of Chinese self-exoticization as a marketing strategy.]

[Add here, largely from Cai, elaboration of the Chinese *wuxia* literary tradition and warrior women narratives. *Wuxia*, knight errant romance-narrative with figures (including women warriors) moving in a fantasy world and living by a code of honor. (sexuality is supressed in traditional tales; Quing period adds heterosexual romance, but emerging after a stenuous martial competition of the principals.

In contrast to portrayals of women in Hollywood films, the martial arts representations do not invoke the female as an erotic object to gratify men's sexual desires. A defeminized being vacated from the conventional pattern of domesticity, feminine charm, and sexuality, the woman warrior is neither enchanted or disenchanted by love. When film was introduced to China at the end of the nineteenth century, the *wuxia* discourse found a new artistic expression. thanks to its ties with Peking opera, which regularly features young fighting women (*wudan*) in acrobatic scenes, the woman warrior has long been active in martial arts cinema. True to the martial arts origin, the filmic versions allow the woman warrior to share many masculine qualities: she is active, mobile, physically strong, and capable of chivalry as any male. But it would be wrong to assume that gender boundaries and gender hierarchy are no long meaningful in this apparently egalitarian discourse.(Cai 448)]

Understanding larger cultural contexts means that viewers might have to learn to redefine concepts such as female competition and physical expression, as well as the relation of the contemporary male auteur director and female star personae. [elaborate here on Tarantino's adoration of Thurman as a complicating factor.]

Technological innovation in commercial entertainment film also provides a new imagination and understanding of female agency in the action film. Although earlier melodramas (as in Singer) used physical acrobatics, and thus depended on performer (or stunt double) embodied skill, or clever use of camerawork and editing to create plausible actions, now in martial arts films, the contemporary (and largely based in Hong Kong fight choreography) use of "wire work," and digital processes for portraying stunts, combat, and other effects create a different set of conventions for the representation of bodies in motion. [First brought to wide scale attention with *The Matrix*.] Earlier film combat, including women warriors, was largely dealt with by editing--with the notable exception of some women performers who were genuinely skilled martial artists such as Cynthia Rothrock (who worked largely in Hong Kong and Asian cinema). But in work from about 1990 on, filmmakers have been able to present convincing acrobatics, sword and gun play, and physical combat by women actors who do not have

many years of physical and skill training. These technical changes encouragae a plausible astonishment on the part of the audience in witnessing the filmed actions. Thus the forms of "New Hollywood" have been inflected by changing perceptions of performing gender in physical combat. In turn, these performances change public understandings of female agency. [needs elaboration] [transition]

Theron doing her own stunts vs. Milla

Questions of voyeurism and identification

[elaboration of the critical/theoretical issues

1. Naive understanding of "the male gaze"
and Mulvey's use of the phallic woman as a limited model

2. the problem of visual and narrational positioning, particularly when transnational appropriation is unevenly received by audiences

3. Subjectivity and point of view; considerations on Lara Croft as the cyberheroine, the shooter position (with a discussion of Peggy Awesh's experimental video *She Puppet*), and complicated fluid gender depictions/subversions and relations in videogames with extended reference to Schleiner's article, hacker modifications, and recent queer theory speculations.]

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